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BIERCE AND MENCKEN
as
CRITICS OF THEIR TIMES

by

Shirley D. Wagstaff

Presented in partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts.

State University of Montana

1931

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Foreword

The purpose of this paper is to make a comparative study of the ideas and manner of two modern American critics - Ambrose Bierce and Henry Louis Mencken. It is but rarely that either of them sets pen to paper except for an attack upon some phase of American life, and it is therefore from that angle that this paper approaches them with the aim of reaching conclusions as to the attitudes of both critics toward the America of their times and as to the relations existing between their views.

It is possible that a question may arise as to the representativeness of the quotations used in these chapters to indicate the attitudes of the man under discussion. True, much of the work of Bierce and H. L. Mencken, in common with most journalism, is available only in newspaper files. Both men, however, have made collections of the essays which they thought most deserving of preservation, and it is reasonable to suppose that they have chosen essays which are representative of their general opinions. These are, in the case of Bierce, the twelve volumes of his Collected Works, and in the case of Mr. Mencken, his six series of Prefudices. I have read all these, as well as several other volumes by Mr. Mencken, and find little, if any, inconsistency, in the

ideas of either man from year to year. The quotations may therefore be safely taken as indications of permanent attitudes of the persons by whom they were written.

I have deliberately chosen an objective method in the six chapters which deal with Bierce and Mr. Mencken individually, reserving my own comments and interpretations for the last chapter which treats them in relation to each other. One cannot be too cautious when discussing two writers not exactly contemporaneous who have close similarity of opinions. We do not know whether Bierce had ever read a word of Mr. Mencken's work, but Mr. Mencken has revealed in an essay on Bierce, contained in the first series of Prejudices, that he has read some of his essays - he does not say how many, but implies that the number is not great. It is not my intention to charge H. L. Mencken with having taken any of his ideas from Bierce's work, but I do wish to point out in this paper that there is a much closer identity of ideas (setting aside the obvious differences of manner and spirit) between the two American critics than is usually recognized.

PART I

AMBROSE BIERCE

Government

Ambrose Gwinett Bierce was born in Meigs County, Ohio, in 1842. A young man when the Civil War began, he enlisted and served with gallantry in the Union army, later being brevetted major for distinguished service. In 1866 he accepted a position with the Sub-Treasury in San Francisco and employed his spare time writing for the newspapers. He spent a few years in London, but returned in 1875 to California, where he made journalism his profession. Through his column of "Prattle" which he wrote for Hearst's San Francisco Examiner he acquired a local reputation, and upon being sent East in 1895 to wage verbal war against the railroad funding bill he became more widely known. For the rest of his life he drifted back and forth between California and the eastern coast, writing spasmodically for the Hearst papers, for Cosmopolitan from 1905 to 1909, and after that year editing his Collected Works in twelve volumes. Then in 1913, weary of a life of inactivity, he disappeared into Mexico in search of adventure in the revolution of that country. No word has ever come back as to his fate; he disappeared completely from the literary world.

Simultaneously with his disappearance came a wave of interest in him. During his life his opinions were read

with amusement or indignation by his newspaper public, but no other attention was paid him. He was a satirist, very often bitter and sardonic, but witty in the extreme. He fearlessly attacked anything and everything he saw about him - the government, social and economic conditions, and the state of American letters. He jeered at life itself, and the people of his time disapproved of him even while some of them were entertained by his wit. His method of attack was violent, cynical, personal, and careless of giving injury. His own opinions, preferences, and prejudices were his guides; anyone who dared to disagree with him he played unmercifully. At the present time we see the justice and shrewdness of many of his convictions, but in his own time he knew himself to be considered an heretic - a dangerous character. His Collected Works, for which there has been little demand, include several volumes of essays which appeared in his newspaper columns; the more famous Devil's Dictionary, a collection of caustic definitions; two volumes of verse; a romance, The Monk and the Hangman's Daughter; and - best known of all - two volumes of short stories, In the Midst of Life (stories growing out of the Civil War) and Can Such Things Be? (Stories of the supernatural).

In a long satiric essay on a strange people called

the Tamtonians, Bierce has given us his opinion of the American system of politics. The government of Tamtonia, he tells us, is what is known in the language as a 'gil-buper'. It is supposed to have been invented by an ancient chief of the race, named Natas, and is of infinite complexity, its various functions distributed among as many officers as possible. The tenure of office is short, and usually a man is turned out before he has acquired sufficient experience to perform his duties with credit to himself or profit to the country. The people of the country think it useless to study political science or to profit by the misfortunes of other countries, so that Tamtonia is the home of all the discreditable political and fiscal heresies imaginable.

The ruler of the nation, called a 'Tnediserp', is chosen every five years, but may be rechosen for five more. He is supposed to be selected by the people themselves, but in reality they have nothing to do with his selection. The adult male population of the island divides itself into two or more 'seitrap' - commonly there are three or four, but only two ever have any considerable numerical strength, and none is ever strong morally or intellectually. All the members of each 'ytrap' profess the same political opinions, which are provided for them

by their leaders every five years and written down on pieces of paper so they will not be forgotten. The moment that any Tamtonian has read his piece of paper, or 'mroftalp', he unhesitatingly adopts all the opinions that he finds written on it, even though they may be altogether different from those with which he was supplied five years before and has been advocating ever since.

At the same time that each 'ytrap' is supplied with its political opinions for the next five years, its leaders name a man whom they wish chosen for the office of 'Tnediserp'. He is usually an idiot from birth, the Tamtonians having a great veneration for such. Although few members of the 'ytrap' have ever heard of him before, they at once believe him to have been long the very greatest idiot in the country, and for the next few months they do little else than quote his words and point to his actions to prove that his idiocy is of entirely superior quality to that of his opponent. All this time his opponents are trying to blacken his character by the foulest conceivable falsehoods, some even going so far as to assert that he is not an idiot at all! It is generally agreed among them that if he were chosen to office the most dreadful disasters would ensue, and that, therefore, he will not be chosen.

There exists also a profound belief in the wisdom of

majorities and the error of minorities. In some mysterious way this belief co-exists with the deepest disgust and most earnest disapproval of a decision which a majority has made. Indeed, one political 'ytrap' sustained six defeats without at all impairing its conviction that the right side must win, and was always sure that it would succeed because it believed itself in the right!

One of the two antagonistic idiots having been chosen as ruler, it is customary to speak of him as the 'choice of the people ', whereas it is obvious that he is one of the few men whom it is certainly known that nearly one-half of the people regard as unfit for the position. He is less certainly the 'people's choice' than any other man in the country excepting his unsuccessful opponents; for while it is known that a large body of his countrymen did not want him, it cannot be known how many of his supporters really preferred some other person, but had not opportunity to make their preference effective.

Each congenital idiot whom the axe-grinders name for the office of 'Tnedisarp' has upon the 'ticket' with him a dead man, who stands or falls with his leader. There is no way of voting for the idiot without voting for the corpse also. When one of these precious couples has been chosen the idiot in due time enters upon the duties of his office and

the corpse is put into an ice-chest and carefully preserved from decay. If the idiot should himself become a corpse he is buried at once and the other body is then haled out to take his place. It is propped up in the seat of authority and duly instated in power. This is the signal for a general attack upon it.

During the four months intervening between the ax-men's selection of candidates and the people's choice between those selected (a period known as the 'laitnedisorp ngiapmac') the Tamtonian character is seen at its worst. No crime is too great to commit or accuse their opponents of committing. The laws against bribery, made by themselves, are set at naught; the best of friends quarrel and openly insult one another. The women, who know almost as little of the matters at issue as the men, take part in the abominable discussions; some even encourage the general demoralization by showing themselves at the public meetings, sometimes actually putting themselves into uniform and marching in procession with banners, music and torchlights.

In Tamtonia there is a current popular saying dating from many centuries back and running this way: "Eht eciffo dluchs kees eht nam, ton eht nam eht eciffo" - which may be translated thus: "No citizen ought to try to secure

power for himself, but should be selected by others for his fitness to exercise it." The sentiment of this saying has long since ceased to exist; recently one of the congenital idiots who was a candidate for the office of 'Tnediserp' boldly broke the inhibition and made speeches to the people in advocacy of himself, all over the country.

To the American mind nothing can be more shocking than the Tamtonian practice of openly soliciting political preferment and even paying money to assist in securing it. With us such immodesty would be taken as proof of the offender's unfitness to exercise the power which he asks for or bear the dignity which, in soliciting it, he belittles. Yet no Tamtonian ever refused to take the hand of a man guilty of such conduct, and there have been instances of fathers giving these greedy vulgarians the hands of their daughters in marriage and thereby assisting to perpetuate the species. The kind of government given by men who go about begging for the right to govern can be more easily imagined than endured. They are undoubtedly the most pestilent race of rascals and ignoramuses to be found anywhere in the universe.¹

1. Ambrose Bierce, Collected Works, 12 Vols, I, "The Tamtonians".

This, then, is Bierce's opinion of American government. The sentiments expressed in this rather obvious satire are to be found everywhere in his essays. His main quarrel with the democratic system of government is that its root lies in the assumed honesty and intelligence of the majority, "the masses", who are really neither honest nor intelligent. The "average man" is our lawful ruler, and his rule is ferocious as well as insupportable.

The policies of government are determined by a majority of these average men, but majority rule is only a perverted conception of the old "Might makes right". That a body of men can be wiser than its wisest member is ridiculous - one might as well claim that a forest can be taller than its tallest tree. In a combination of idiocies is not found the secret of sanity. And to add to the confused state of affairs, there is the clamour for woman suffrage - more idiocies to be added to the voting public. Surely America is riding for a fall not far in the future.

In another essay,² in which he looks back from the vantage point of the year 4930 at the disrupted American civilization, he sees that the most general and comprehensive cause of the failure of American government was the

2. Ibid., "Ashes of the Beacon".

very nature of the thing itself - its much vaunted 'self-government'. The word itself involves a contradiction; for government means control by something other than the thing to be controlled. When the thing governed is the same as the thing governing there is no government, though for a time there may be a considerable degree of forbearance which gives a misleading appearance of public order. But when men perceive that nothing is restraining them but their consent to be restrained, than at last there is nothing to obstruct the free play of that selfishness which is the dominant characteristic and fundamental motive of human nature and human action. And so politics become a struggle of interests, and its methods become frankly serviceable to personal and class advantage:

"Politics, n. - a strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles. The conduct of public affairs for private advantage."³

Such a state of affairs is certain to have a degenerating effect upon the sort of man who holds the public offices in the country. In the first place, men do not stay in office long enough to make it worth their while to learn anything about the science of government or to adopt politics as the study of their lives. What is done one year is un-

3. Bierce, Op. Cit., VII, "Devil's Dictionary", p. 258.

done the next year, and done over again a little later. If we wish to command the services of men of honor we must accord them honorable treatment;

"the rule now is for the party to which they belong to give them a half-hearted support while suffering all other parties to slander and insult them . . . Everywhere the unreasonable complaint is heard that good men will not 'go into politics'; everywhere the ignorant and malignant masses and their no less malignant and hardly less ignorant leaders and spokesmen, having sown the wind of reasonless obstruction and partisan vilification, are reaping the whirlwind of misrule. So far as concerns the public service, gentlemen are mostly on a strike against introduction of the mud-machine."⁴

Unless attracted by the salary, why should a gentleman 'aspire' to the presidency of the United States? - the utmost that he can expect in the way of reward not expressible in terms of the national currency is that not much more than one half of his countrymen will believe him a scoundrel to the end of their days.

But even with scoundrels controlling the government and demagogues in public office, the American nation is so optimistic as to believe that it has Liberty. Absurd! jeers Bierce, and goes on -

4. Ibid., XI, "Shadow on the Dial", p. 34f.

"there is to be a rude awakening . . . We shall learn that our blind dependence upon the magic of words is a fatuous error; that the fortuitous arrangement of consonants and vowels which we worship as Liberty is of slight efficacy in disarming the lunatic brandishing a bomb. Liberty, indeed! The murderous wretch loves it a deal better than we, and wants more of it. Liberty! one almost sickens of the words, so quick and glib it is on every lip - so destitute of meaning."⁵

Freedom of speech is another aberration growing out of imaginary liberty. It was harmless as long as it was practiced only by Americans themselves, who have long been accustomed to the use of unmeaning declamations and threats with no intention of execution. But they made a mistake when they extended this privilege to foreign anarchists, thinking that if these radicals were allowed to say what they would like to do they would not care to do it. Bierce was convinced that the anarchists were rapidly over-running the country, and that they soon would have complete control of the nation.

The point of a certain anecdote in the Devil's Dictionary is that Satan's last request before his ejection from Heaven was that man should be permitted to make his own laws; this was granted and so ordered. And that is Bierce's attitude toward the legislation of America. The legislators are a rascally assortment of men - mostly lawyers, to whose

5. Bierce, op. cit., XI, p. 23.

interest it is to make the laws uncertain and perplexing. The only check upon their ill-doing lies in the certainty of their disagreement as to the particular kind of confusion which they may think it expedient to create. A clear, simple and just code would deprive them of their means of livelihood and compel them to seek some honest employment.⁶

The result, the best that can be said of any 'measure' is that the sum of its perceptible benefits seems to exceed the sum of its perceptible evils so as to constitute a balance of advantage. Most of them have to be speedily and repeatedly amended, many repealed, and of those permitted to stand, the greater number fall into disuse and are forgotten. As a consequence, the laws are neither executed nor observed, and lawlessness, in the form of robbery, dishonesty, and murder, is everywhere evident.

And by far the most ridiculous feature of all in regard to legislation is the manner in which laws are declared constitutional or unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Not infrequently it occurs that some law which has for years been rigorously enforced, even by fines and imprisonment, and to which the whole commercial and social life of the nation has adjusted itself is brought before the tribunal having final jurisdiction in the matter and coolly declared no law at all. And those who by loyal obedience to the statute all those

6. Bierce, op. cit., I, "The Kingdom of Tartirra", p. 191.

years have been injured in property or by disobedience have suffered severe penalties have no means of redress. The absurdity with which the three departments of government are entangled he aims to show in the following:

"Executive, n. - an officer of the Government, whose duty it is to enforce the wishes of the legislative power until such time as the judicial department shall be pleased to pronounce them invalid and of no effect. Following is an extract from an old book entitled, The Lunarian Astonished - Pfeiffer & Co., Boston, 1803:

Lunarian: Then when your Congress has passed a law it goes directly to the Supreme Court in order that it may at once be known whether it is constitutional?

Terrestrial: O no; it does not require the approval of the Supreme Court until having perhaps been enforced for many years somebody objects to its operation against himself - I mean his client. The President, if he approves it, begins to execute it at once.

Lunarian: Ah, the executive power is a part of the legislative. Do your policemen also have to approve the local ordinances that they enforce?

Terrestrial: Not yet - at least not in their character of constables. Generally speaking, though, all laws require the approval of those whom they are intended to restrain.

Lunarian: I see. The death warrant is not valid until signed by the murderer.

Terrestrial: My friend, you put it too strongly; we are not so consistent.

Lunarian: But this system of maintaining an expensive judicial machinery to pass upon the validity of laws only after they have long been executed, and then only when brought before the court by some private person - does it not cause great confusion?

Terrestrial: It does.

Lunarian: Why then should not your laws, previously to being executed, be validated, not by the signature of your President, but by that of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court?

Terrestrial: There is no precedent for any such course.

Lunarian: Precedent. What is that?

Terrestrial: It has been defined by five hundred lawyers in three volumes each. So how can anyone know?

Precedent! There is a precedent for any decision that a judge may wish to make, but sometimes he is too indolent to search it out and cite it. He has only to ignore those which make against his interest and accentuate those in the line of his desire.

"In theory our (judicial) system is perfect. The accused is prosecuted by a public officer, who having no interest in his conviction, will serve the state without mischievous zeal and perform his disagreeable task with fairness and consideration. He is permitted to entrust his defense to another officer, whose duty it is to make a rigidly truthful and candid presentment of his case in order to assist the court to a just decision. The jurors, if there are jurors, are neither friendly nor hostile, are open minded, intelligent and conscientious. As to the witnesses, are they not sworn to tell the truth, the whole truth (in so far as they are permitted) and nothing but the truth? What could be finer and better than all this? - what could more certainly assure justice?"⁸

But instead of this, here is what happens. After the arrest (formal detention of one accused of unusual-

7. Bierce, op. cit., VII, "Devil's Dictionary", p. 91f.
8. Ibid, XI, "Some Features of the Law", p. 126f.

ness), the culprit is brought to trial, which is defined as:

"a formal inquiry designed to prove and put upon record the blameless characters of judges, advocates and jurors. In order to effect this purpose, it is necessary to supply a contrast in the person of one who is called the defendant, the prisoner, or the accused."⁹

He is represented by a lawyer (one skilled in circumvention of the law) before a judge who depends upon the favor of the people for his office, and then his case goes to a "jury of his peers".

"It is difficult to conceive a more clumsy and ineffective machinery for ascertaining truth and doing justice than a jury of twelve men of the average intelligence . . . It is the practice to prevent men of even the average intelligence from serving as jurors. Jurors had to be residents of the locality of the crime charged, and every crime was made a matter of public notoriety long before the accused was brought to trial; yet as a rule, he who had read or talked about the trial was held disqualified to serve. This in a country where, when a man who could read was not reading about local crimes he was talking about them, or if doing neither was doing something worse!

". . . So unintelligent were these juries that a great part of the time in every trial was consumed in keeping from them certain kinds of evidence with which they could not be trusted; yet the lawyers were permitted to submit to them any kind of misleading argument that they pleased and fortify it with innuendoes without relevancy and logic without sense."¹⁰

Great as is the number of minor and major tribunals, a

9. Bierce, op. cit., VII, p. 349.

10. Ibid, I, "Ashes of the Beacon", p. 36f.

case originating in the lowest is never really settled until it has gone through all the intermediate ones and been passed upon by the highest, to which it might just as well have been submitted at first. Finally, however, justice is secured and judgment passed. Justice? - when a mere trick or technicality may influence the decision?

"Altogether, the entire judicial system of the United States is inefficient, disreputable, and corrupt."¹¹

After all this critical attack, has Bierce anything constructive to offer as a substitute for democracy? He prefers aristocracy to democracy, that is evident from numerous incidental statements, but he seems never to have carefully thought out any method by which it might be achieved or even the details of such a system once it might be established. Probably an hereditary monarchy would be as satisfactory as any other type of government, he thinks. The most extended discussion that he has given on the subject is the following:

"If government has any meaning it means the restraint of the many by the few - the subordination of number to brains. It means denial to the masses of the right to cut their own throats and ours. It means grasp and control of all social forces and material enginery - a vigilant censorship of the press, a firm

11. Op. Cit., Bierce, p. 40.

hand upon the churches, keen supervision of public meetings and public amusements, command of the railroads, telegraph and all means of communication. It means, in short, ability to make use of all beneficent influences of enlightenment for the general good, and to array all the powers of civilization against civilization's natural enemies - "the masses." Government like this has a thousand defects, but it has one merit: it is government.

"Despotism? Yes. It is the despotisms of the world that have been the conservators of civilization. It is the despot who, most powerful for mischief, is alone powerful for good. It is conceded that government is necessary - even by the 'fierce democracies' that madly renounce it. But in so far as government is not despotic it is not government".¹²

12. Op. Cit., XI, "Shadow on the Dial", p. 41f.

Economics

Bierce never systematized his theories on economics as he did his ideas in the political field. The subject did not interest him as much, and most of his observations are dependent upon or incidental to his theories of politics and government.

As Bierce saw it, the entire trend of our modern civilization is toward combination and aggregation, and we are powerless to stop its advance in every department of human activity - social, industrial, commercial, military, political. It is the dominant phenomenon of our time. Labor combines into "unions", capital into "trusts", - everywhere the unit of control is enlarging. Therefore let legislation, instead of trying to destroy the trusts, aim to regulate them, so that they will contribute to the public good instead of being a menace to society. It is not primarily the fault of the trusts themselves that they sometimes become corrupt, and he goes on, speaking from the vantage point of the year 4930 A. D., to say:

"Had the people been honest and intelligent, as the politicians affirmed them to be, the combination of capital could have worked no public injury - would, in truth, have been a great public benefit. It enormously reduced the expense of production and distribution, assured greater permanency of employment, opened better opportunities to general and special aptitude, gave an improved product, and at first supplied it at a reduced price. Its crowning merit was that the industries of the country,

being controlled by a few men from a central source, could themselves be easily controlled by law if law had been honestly administered. Under the old order of scattered jurisdictions, requiring a multitude of actions at law, little could be done, and little was done, to put a check on commercial greed; under the new, much was possible, and at times something was accomplished. But not for long; the essential dishonesty of the American character enabled these capable and conscienceless managers -- "captains of industry" or "kings of finance" -- to buy with money advantages and immunities superior to those that the labor unions could obtain by menaces and the promise of votes. The legislatures, the courts, the executive officers, all the sources of authority and springs of control, were defiled and impested until right and justice fled affrighted from the land, and the name of the country became a stench in the nostrils of the world.

"Let us pause in our narrative to say here that much of the abuse of the so-called "trusts" by their victims took no account of the folly, stupidity and greed of the victims themselves."¹³

If people do not want trusts - if they do not want economy and lower prices - let them patronize the small dealer. At any rate, let them be consistent - to buy from the trusts and at the same time lament the passing of the small dealer is ridiculous.

Consolidation of capital has quite naturally brought about an organization of labor. "Organized discontent" in the laboring population is not a new thing, but this time

13. Bierce, op. cit., I, "Ashes of the Beacon", p. 78f.

it threatens to make serious trouble, and Bierce predicts open hostilities before agreement is reached. Any appearance of peace between the two factions is only a suspension of hostilities - most of the time there is not even a pretense of amity.

"Industrial discontent" has a number of causes, the original one being over-population. But the condition is greatly aggravated by popular education and higher education of too many. Education promises avoidance of work, but the promise cannot be kept to all, and the disappointment is transmitted into political mischief. A man is not made intelligent by mere ability to read and write - his little learning is a dangerous thing. The professions are overcrowded, their ethics become worse from increasing competition, and manual labor is no longer regarded as "honorable". The population is roughly divisible into:

"a conscienceless crowd of brain-workers who have so 'bettered their condition' as to live by prey, and a sullen multitude of manual laborers blowing the coals of discontent and plotting a universal overthrow."¹⁴

The second great cause of industrial discontent is woman in industry. In no age or country has there ever

14. Bierce, op. cit., IX, "Some Aspects of Education", p. 124.

been sufficient employment for those desiring it - it is no wonder that the injection of over thirty percent more people into the wage-earning population precipitated an upheaval. Each woman employed displaced or excluded some man, who, compelled to seek a lower employment, displaced another, and so on, until the least capable or most unlucky of the series became a tramp.

The tragedy lies in the fact that this invasion of the industrial field by woman was unaccompanied by any material advantage to herself. She is no better provided for than she was before provided for by some man, and she has certainly injured man's position. Neither would the suffrage (which had not the time of Bierce's writing been awarded to women) do her any good, as she was not intelligent enough to use it to advantage.

"The frosty truth is that except in the home the influence of women is not elevating, but debasing. When they stoop to uplift men who need uplifting, they are themselves pulled down, and that is all that is accomplished."¹⁵

Bierce's hatred for democracy led him to attack such movements as socialism and anarchy, which he saw to be still further breaking down what little aristocracy there was left in America. He despised both of them, and was quite firmly

15. Bierce, op. cit., XI, "The Opposing Sex", p. 280.

convinced that socialism would soon lead to anarchy.

"Socialism and Anarchism are parts of the same thing, in the sense that the terminal points of a road are parts of the same road. Between them, about midway, lies the system that we have the happiness to endure. It is a 'blend' of socialism and anarchism in about equal parts; all that is not one is the other."¹⁶

American socialism is not a political doctrine; it is a state of mind. The socialist was born a rebel; he is no heretic to reclaim but a patient to be restrained - "his unreason is what he is a socialist with".¹⁷

But in spite of all these disruptions the country is prosperous - the richest nation in the world!

"But at how great a sacrifice of better things was its wealth obtained! By . . . exalting the worth of wealth and making it the test and touchstone of merit; by ignoring art, scorning literature and despising science, except as these might contribute to the glutting of the purse; by setting up and maintaining an artificial standard of morals which condoned all offenses against the property and peace of everyone but the condoner; by pitilessly crushing out of their natures every sentiment and aspiration unconnected with accumulation of property, these civilized savages and commercial barbarians attained their sordid end."¹⁸

This last quotation is typical of most of Bierce's method of economic criticism; he had not studied history to determine what the causes of the present ills were - rather he preferred to project himself into the future

16. Bierce, op. cit., "The Shadow on the Dial", p. 17.

17. Ibid., IX, "The Socialist - What He is, and Why", p. 37f.

18. Ibid., I, p.33f.

and relate the downfall of the American system after it had gone on in the condition it was in his time. He was not an economist - he was an observer with violent reactions, and he thought American economic life was conducted in a fashion of which no honorable man could approve.¹⁹

19. Hartley C. Grattan, Bitter Bierce, New York, 1929, p.218.

Literature

In the field of letters as well as in all other phases of the life of his day, Ambrose Bierce found himself at variance with popular tradition; it might be even more indicative of his attitude to say that he found American letters at odds with him. H. L. Mencken's reading of his criticism led him to write that "Bierce's critical judgments were often silly, . . . and not infrequently they were strongly colored by personal considerations. He was too little read to be a sound critic of letters, and he lacked the capacity to separate the artist from the man."²⁰ And Bierce rationalized his own weakness in that collection of essays called 'The Opinionater':

"In literary criticism there are no criteria, no accepted standards of excellence by which to test the work . . ."

"Having no standards, criticism is an erring guide. Its pronouncements are more interesting than valuable, and interesting chiefly from the insight that they give into the mind, not of the writer criticised, but of the writer criticising."²¹

Bierce seems to have written no extended essays on

20. H. L. Mencken, "The Ambrose Bierce Mystery", in American Mercury, XVIII

21. Bierce, op. cit., X, "On Literary Criticism", p. 25.

literary figures; there are only a few on lesser contemporary writers, such as George Sterling, Edwin Markham, and Emma Frances Dawson. Of others we find only incidental mention, and even that is rare. As a rule, he confined his criticism to discussion of trends in American literature, most of which he attacked without reserve.

Unable to find anything of value in contemporary literature, he proposed as a coat of arms for American letters an illiterate hoodlum rampant on a field of dead authors: motto, "To Hell with Literature."²² For this state of affairs he blamed the commercialization of literature:

"That literature, in this country and England at least, has somewhat fallen from its high estate and is regarded even by many of its purveyors as a mere trade is unfortunately true, as we see in the genesis and development of the 'literary syndicates'; in the unholy alliance between the book reviewer and the head of the advertising department; in the systematic 'booming' of certain books and authors by methods . . . not materially different from those used for the promotion of a patent medicine; in the reverent attitude of editors and publishers toward authors of 'best sellers', and in more things than can be set down here. In the last century when, surely by no fortuitous happening,

22. Grattan, op. cit., p. 101.

American literature was made by such men as Irving, Cooper, Bryant, Poe, Emerson, Whittier, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Holmes and Lowell, these purely commercial phenomena were in less conspicuous evidence and some of them were altogether indiscernable.

"That the period of literature's commercialization should be that of its decay is obviously more than a coincidence . . . The authors of today and their agents have acquired the disagreeable habit of taking their wares to the highest bidder - the publisher who will give the highest royalties and the broadest publicity."²³

As a result of his own experiences, which included several rejections by editors and publishers, he cordially hated these two classes of people. Editors were "the trouble with American literature", and were largely responsible for making "platitudes the fundamental element and special glory of popular literature."²⁴ Publishers are attacked wherever he could wedge in a comment on them, and at great length in the Devil's Dictionary.

One of the most deplorable tendencies of the times he found to be the injection of 'purpose' into literature - not by the author, but by the critics. Citing numerous instances of this in reviews, he goes on to say:

"Your critic of widest vogue and chief authority among us is he who is best skilled in read-

23. Bierce, op. cit., IX, p. 242 f.

24. Ibid., VII, "Devil's Dictionary", p. 256.

ing between the lines; in interpreting an author's purpose; in endowing him with a 'problem' and noting his degree of skill in its solution. The author - stupid fellow! - did not write between the lines, had no purpose but to entertain, was unaware of a problem. So much the worse for him; so much the better for his expounder. Interlinear cipher, purpose, problem, are all the critic's own, and he derives a lively satisfaction in his creation - looks upon it and pronounces it good."²⁵

He has attacked the critics on the same score in some of his verse:

"Let them in jargon of their trade rehearse
The moral meaning of the random verse
That runs spontaneous from the poet's pen
To be half-blotted by ambitious men
Who hope with his their names to link
By writing o'er it in another ink
The thoughts unreal which they think they think,
Until the mental eye in vain inspects
The hateful palimpsest to find the text."²⁶

When we come to examine his ideas on narrative fiction, we find that he denounced the novel and approved the short story and the romance. The novel is simply 'a short story padded'. Bearing the same relation to literature that a panorama does to art, it is too large to give totality of effect. "The only way to get unity of impression from a novel is to shut it up and look at the covers."²⁷ It is too long to be read at a single sitting, and consequently it is broken up into parts so that there is no coherent

25. Bierce, op. cit., X, "On Literary Criticism", p. 33.

26. Ibid., IV, "For a Certain Critic", p. 85.

27. Ibid., I, "The Short Story", p. 236.

and harmonious memory of the work as a whole. Worse yet, the novel is 'imagination chained to the perch of probability'. The first three essentials of the literary art are 'imagination, imagination, and imagination' - that is why the romance is the superior form of fiction.

"In the novel the writer's thought is tethered to probability, as a domestic horse to the hitching post, but in romance it ranges at will over the entire region of the imagination - free, lawless, immune to bit and rein. Your novelist is a poor creature, . . . a mere reporter. He may invent his characters and plot, but he must not imagine anything taking place that might not occur, albeit his entire narrative is candidly a lie."²³

The romanticist is free to represent life, not as it is, but as it might be. And so the romance is essential and permanent, while the novel is accidental and transient. Already, Bierce believed, the art of writing novels is long dead everywhere except in Russia, where it is new. In England it began with Richardson and ended with Thackeray; novels are still produced in great quantities, of course, and because there are some great writers there are some novels that are worth reading even today, but as a type it is of little value, he thinks. And as a rule,

"the novel of today has no art broader and better than that of its individual sentences-

23. Bierce, op. cit., VII, "The Devil's Dictionary", p.298.

the art of style. That would serve it if it had style."²⁹

Equally with the novel, the short story may drag at each remove a lengthening chain of probability, but there are fewer removes. It does not, at least, cloy attention, or confuse with so many impressions that it effaces its own effect. Its unity and singleness of effect are the features which commend it to Bierce; he used the form for all of his own narrative writing, with the single exception of the longer Monk and the Hangman's Daughter, which is a romance.

But even though he sets the stamp of his approval upon the short story as a type, he does not hesitate to launch attack after attack in a satiric vein upon the short story as written by contemporaries. Especially abominable are those in the magazines:

"The art of writing short stories for the magazines of the period can not be acquired. Success depends upon a kind of inability that must be 'born into' one -- it does not come at call. The torch must be passed down the line by the thumbless hands of an illustrious line of prognathous ancestors unacquainted with fire. For the torch has neither light nor heat - is, in truth, fireproof. It radiates darkness and all shadows fall toward it. The magazine story must relate nothing: like Dr. Horn's 'holes' in the

29. Bierce, op. cit., X, p.236.

luminiferous ether, it is something in which nothing can occur . . . action and incident are fatal to it. It must provoke neither thought nor emotion; it must only stir up from the shallows of its readers' understandings the sediment which they are pleased to call sentiment, murking all their mental pool and effacing the reflected images of their natural environment.

"The master of this school of literature is Mr. Howells. Destitute of that supreme and almost sufficient literary endowment, imagination, he does, not what he would, but what he can - takes notes with his eyes and ears and 'writes them up' as does any other reporter."³⁰

And in the same vein of exaggerated witticism is his definition of a serial story:

"Serial, n. - A literary work, usually a story that is not true, creeping through several issues of a newspaper or magazine. Frequently appended to each installment is a 'synopsis of preceding chapters' for those who have not read them, but a direr need is a synopsis of succeeding chapters for those who do not intend to read them. A synopsis of the entire work would be still better."³¹

Probably one of Bierce's reasons for his dislike of the novel was the fact that he connected ^{it} with realism, a literary spirit which he hated. He defines it as

"the art of depicting nature as it is seen by toads. The charm suffusing a landscape painted by a mole, or a story written by a measuring-worm."³²

This attitude seems to have grown out of his very active

30. Bierce, op. cit., X, p. 236f.

31. Ibid., VII, "Devil's Dictionary", p. 319.

32. Ibid., p. 276.

dislike of the world he was in; we have seen his contempt for the 'average man' - a story which set forth sordid details of such a creature could be nothing but distasteful to Bierce. His complaint here is similar to what he said of the novel: that in fiction he esteemed not mere reporting, but imagination. Likewise, he deplored 'local color' as the most ineffective thing in literature - the best literature should be universal.

The quality in literature which Bierce esteemed above all others was 'pure English'. He always used it himself, and to all those who came to him for advice about their literary work he advocated precision and complete control of the mechanism of expression. Intense self-conscious discipline was usually necessary to attain such perfection, and he believed any effort in this direction, however hard, was repaid by the beauty of pure English.

One is not surprised, then, to find that he despises the use of dialect or slang. Dialect, to be at all allowable in literature, must be the mother-speech, not only of the characters using it, but of the writer himself, who, also, must be unable to write equally well in the large tongue, as was the case with Burns.

"A true dialect is legitimate, the faulty speech of an educated person in an unfamiliar tongue is legitimate, as is that of a child; but the lame locution of the merely ignorant - the language of the letterless - that is not dialect, and in any quantity is excess of an amount that may be needful in fiction for vraisemblance, or in verse

for humor, is reasonless and offensive."³³

The law is relaxed for such humorous and satirical work as The Biglow Papers: Bierce himself uses the speech of a child in his 'Little Johnny' stories; if in serious prose fiction the narrative demands the introduction of an 'unlettered hind' whose speech would naturally be 'racy of the soil' he must come in and 'sport the tangles of his tongue', but he should be got rid of as soon as possible - preferably by death; but of writers who consistently employed dialect he was scornful. Of James Whitcomb Riley he said, "In the dirt of his 'dialect' there is no grain of gold . . . His diction is without felicity; his vocabulary is not English." And of the stories of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Mary Noailles Murfree he wrote:

"Now, the 'dialect' of which these persons are so enamored as to fill whole volumes with it is not dialect; it is simply English as spoken by none but uneducated persons and 'recorded' by those to whom ignorance is attractive and seems picturesque. To a sane intelligence it is neither."³⁴

Percival Pollard, one of Bierce's most energetic champions, says of him: "Against slang and against dia-

33. Bierce, op. cit., IX, "Writers of Dialect", p. 178.

34. Ibid., p. 177.

lect - against any departure from pure English, in fact - one man in America has constantly turned his face."³⁵ And Walter Neale, one of the men who knew him most intimately, tells that he (Neale) once protested that language is made in the street. Bierce quickly exclaimed, "It is not! It is made by scientists, in their laboratories - that is how language is made."³⁶ The charge which he frequently made against slang was that it lacked originality and that it required no mental equipment to use it. We find it defined as

"the grunt of the human hog (*Pignorumus intolerabilis*) with an audible memory. The speech of one who utters with his tongue what he thinks with his ear, and feels the pride of a creator in accomplishing the feat of a parrot. A means (under Providence) of setting up as a wit without a capital of sense."³⁷

Until a word or phrase is common property it is not slang- wherein, then, is the sense or humor of repeating it, he argued.

Still, in his arguments for pure English, he said that it was far from his aim to hedge in the language so closely that it could not grow. He was constantly attacking lexi-

35. Percival Pollard, Their Day in Court: The Case of American Letters, quoted in Walter Neale, Life of Ambrose Bierce, New York, 1929, p. 261.

36. Neale, op. cit., p. 365.

37. Bierce, op.cit., VII, p. 322 f.

cographers who were attempting to make English static, and he defined the dictionary as

"a malevolent literary device for cramping the growth of a language, making it hard and inelastic."³⁸

He desired a living language - accurate, adequate, and cultured.

When it came to the drama, Bierce confessed that he knew little, and he makes but few references to it. But he felt that the dramatic form was the most artistic of all the methods known to him, and applied the method to his own short stories. Time, he thought, would prove the dramatic to be the most enduring of literary forms, for it has a vitality lacking in the others. But the drama as played in his time aroused his criticism because of its excessive use of scenery and costume to the neglect of acting.

In his theories of poetry, Bierce was a conservative. He demanded that it be free from mawkish sentiment and that it be technically perfect both in rhyme and in form. Most of his own verse, found in the two volumes of his Collected Works, "Shapes of Clay" and "Black Beetles in Amber"

38. Bierce, op.cit., p.71.

while satiric, is occasional; the persons whom he attacked were largely local characters, and the incidents which he celebrates are now forgotten, his verse is ephemeral. Just how far he let himself descend in this may be seen by a few examples of his 'ante mortem' epitaphs':

"Here lies Greer Harrison, a well cracked louse --
So small a tenant of so big a house!"³⁹

"For those this mausoleum is erected
Who Stanford to the Upper House elected
Their luck is less or their promotion slower
For, dead, they were elected to the Lower."⁴⁰

"Beneath this stone O'Donnell's tongue's at rest -
Our noses by his spirit still addressed,
Living or dead, he's equally Satanic -
His noise a terror and his smell a panic."⁴¹

and this, called "A Literary Method":

"His 'Hoosier poems' Riley says he writes
Upon an empty stomach. Heavenly Powers,
Feed him throat-full; for what the wretch indites
Upon his empty stomach empties ours!"⁴²

He vigorously opposed vers libre and faddists with their 'new thought' and 'new methods'. The rules of prosody were the results of many centuries of experimentation, and who were these young up-starts who were attempting to violate

39. Bierce, op. cit., V, p. 377.

40. Ibid., p. 378.

41. Ibid., p. 380.

42. Ibid., p. 372.

them? To see them extol Whitman and denounce Longfellow (whom he counted truly great among the poets of the English language) infuriated him, and he lost no opportunity of lashing out at them. Blank verse - good blank verse - was the finest as well as the most difficult of verse forms, and Milton alone of English poets had mastered it. He held the same belief with reference to poetry that he did to fiction - that it should be short.

It is interesting to see what Bierce thinks of satire, his own particular literary spirit. The form, he feels, is almost never found in America for the reason that, as a nation, we are dolefully deficient in wit.⁴³ Another reason is that it cannot co-exist with such foolish sentiments as 'the brotherhood of man', 'the trusteeship of wealth', moral irresponsibility, tolerance, and socialism.⁴⁴ In an age which holds crime to be a disease and converts the prison into a sanitarium a writer cannot 'lash the rascals naked through the world.'

"Satire, . . . is punishment. As such it has fallen into public disfavor through disbelief in its justice and efficacy. So the rascals go un-lashed. Instead of ridicule we have solemn reprobation; for wit we have 'humor' - with a slang

43. Bierce, op. cit., VII, p. 308.

44. Ibid., X, "The Passing of Satire", p. 282.

word in the first line, two in the second and three in the third. Why, . . . the American reading public hardly knows that there ever was a distinctive kind of writing known, technically, as satire - that it was once not only a glory to literature, but incidentally, a terror to all manner of civic and personal unworth. If we had today an Aristophanes, a Jonathan Swift or an Alexander Pope, he would indubitably be put into a comfortable prison with all sanitary advantages."⁴⁵

And there is his own explanation of his unpopularity in the United States.

45. Bierce, op. cit., p. 233 f.

PART II

H. L. MENCKEN

Americanism

H. L. Mencken, arch-critic of American life and letters for more than twenty-five years, was born in Baltimore in 1880 and has lived there ever since. When only sixteen he was graduated from the Baltimore Polytechnic; he refused to enter college, and was for a short time in his father's tobacco business. But in 1899, after his father's death, he became a reporter on the Baltimore Morning Herald, for which, among other things, he wrote his first column, 'Knocks and Jollies.' Four years later he became city editor of the paper, and not long afterward managing editor. Meanwhile he had published two books - a collection of his poems, Ventures into Verse, and what was the first treatise in English on Shaw, George Bernard Shaw: His Plays. There followed connections with the Evening Herald and the Evening News, both soon severed, and in 1906 he joined the staff of the Baltimore Sun. In 1908 he formed two important connections, one as an editor on the Baltimore Evening Sun, to which he contributed his famous 'Free Lance' column, and the other as dramatic critic on the Smart Set, a place which he shared with George Jean Nathan. The two men later

became editors and partowners of this magazine; in 1924 they started the American Mercury together, but the next year Nathan withdrew from the partnership. Mr. Mencken is still connected with the American Mercury, still writes for the Sun, and still lives in Baltimore.

His enemies (and his frankness has made him many) to the contrary, he is essentially and completely American. He lives in America, makes his living in America, and writes about America to the almost complete exclusion of everything else. He has no sympathy for those who go to Europe to escape America:

"I remain on the dock, wrapped in the flag, when the Young Intellectuals set sail . . . Here I stand, unshaken and undespairing, a loyal and devoted Americano, even a chauvinist, paying taxes without complaint, obeying all laws that are physiologically obeyable, accepting all the searching duties and responsibilities of citizenship unprotestingly, investing the sparse usufructs of my miserable toil in the obligations of the nation, avoiding all commerce with men sworn to overthrow the government, contributing my mite toward the glory of the national arts and sciences, enriching and embellishing the native language, spurning all lures (and even all invitations) to get out and stay out - here am I, a bachelor of easy means, forty-two years old, unhampered by debts or issue, able to go wherever I please and to stay as long as I please - here am I, contentedly and even smugly basking beneath the Stars and Stripes, a better citizen, I daresay, and certainly a less murmurous and exigent one, than thousands who put the Hon. Warren Gamaliel Harding beside Friedrich Barbarossa and Charlemagne, and hold the

Supreme Court to be directly inspired by the Holy Spirit . . "46

But in spite of such protests of loyalty and patriotism, he reserves the right to denounce America indignantly, to criticise it closely, and to ridicule it hilariously as often and as much as he sees fit to do. Few aspects of American life and letters escape his notice; no phase of it is too sacred for him to attack. He is spirited, vigorous, and brilliant in his wholesale denunciations. He makes no claim to consistency; the individualist in him feels that he has the right to differ from himself, the right to be wrong. Consequently, he has not organized his ideas into a system of philosophy; instead, he has a system of feelings, of preferences and prejudices which do lend themselves quite easily to organization. But analysis of his ideas are lifeless; it takes the man's own tremendous force of personality as revealed through his own words to make what he says important - the personality which has so intrigued and influenced Americans of his times, even when he has attacked them savagely and unmercifully.

46. H. L. Mencken, Prejudices, III, New York, 1919-1927, p.11.

The angle of his attack he himself once described when he characterized George Bernard Shaw as 'making a colossal attempt to make a dent in the cosmos with a slapstick'. The comedy seems to have been more than a little successful in his own case. A recent magazine article explains his point of view as well as anything else that he has written or that has been written about him:

"I believe that religion, generally speaking, has been a curse to mankind - that its modest and greatly over estimated services on the ethical side have been more than overborne by the damage it has done to clear and honest thinking.

"I believe that no discovery of fact, however trivial, can be wholly useless to the race, and that no trumpeting of falsehood, however virtuous in intent, can be anything but vicious.

"I believe that all government is evil, in that all government must necessarily make war upon liberty; and that the democratic form is as least as bad as any of the other forms.

"I believe that an artist, fashioning his imaginary worlds out of his own agony and ecstasy, is a benefactor to all of us, but that the worst error we can commit is to mistake his imaginary worlds for the real one.

"I believe in complete freedom of thought and speech, alike for the humblest man and the mightiest, and in the utmost freedom of conduct that is consistent with living in organized society.

"I believe that the evidence for immortality is no better than the evidence for witches, and deserves no more respect.

"I believe in the capacity of man to conquer his world, and to find out what it is made of, and how it is run.

"I believe in the reality of progress.

"I

"But the whole thing, after all, may be put very simply. I believe that it is better to tell the truth than to lie. I believe that is better to be free than to be a slave. And I believe that it is better to know than to be ignorant."⁴⁷

This gives us a basis to work upon, a starting point from which we can understand his prejudices. Mr. Mencken is essentially a satirist, bent upon destroying cant, ridiculing stupidity, and assailing dogmatism wherever he finds them. It is in America that he does find them: in fact, he sees them to be such a large part of the national make-up that most of his attacks may be said to be directed against 'Americanism' in one form or another. The following quotation is typical of his tone and ideas:

"To be happy (reducing the thing to its elements) I must be:

- a.- Well fed, unhounded by sordid cares, at ease in Zion.
- b.- Full of a comfortable feeling of superiority to the masses of my fellow-men.
- c.- Delicately and unceasingly amused according to my taste.

"It is my contention that, if this definition be accepted, there is no country on the face of the earth wherein a man roughly constituted as I am - a man of my general weaknesses, vanities, appetites, prejudices, and aversions - can be so happy or even one-half so happy, as he can be in these free and independent states.

47. H. L. Mencken, "What I Believe", in Forum, LXXXIV.

"Going further, I lay down the proposition that it is a sheer physical impossibility for such a man to live in These States and not be happy - that it is as impossible to him as it would be to a school-boy to weep over the burning down of his school-house. If he says he isn't happy here, then he either lies or is insane. Here the business of getting a living, particularly since the war brought the loot of all Europe to the national strong-box, is enormously easier than it is in any other Christian land - so easy, in fact, that an educated and forehanded man who fails at it must actually make deliberate efforts to that end.

"Here the general average of intelligence, of knowledge, of competence, of integrity, of self-respect, of honor is so low, that any man who knows his trade, does not fear ghosts, has read fifty good books, and practices the common decencies, stands out as brilliantly as a wart on a bald head, and is thrown willy-nilly into a meager and exclusive aristocracy. And here, more than anywhere else that I know of or have heard of, the daily panorama of human existence, or private and communal folly - the unending procession of governmental extortions and chicaneries, of commercial brigandages and throat-slittings, of theological buffooneries, of aesthetic ribaldries, of legal swindles and harlotries, of miscellaneous rogueries, villainies, imbecilities, grotesqueries, and extravagances - is so inordinately gross and preposterous, so perfectly brought up to the highest conceivable amperage, so steadily enriched with an almost fabulous daring and originality, that only the man who was born with a petrified diaphragm can fail to laugh himself to sleep every night, and to awake every morning with all the eager, unflagging expectation of a Sunday-school superintendent touring the Paris peep-shows."⁴⁸

Mr. Mencken is an intelligent man himself - alert, logical, well-informed and extremely individualistic; it

48. Mencken, op. cit., p. 12f.

is perhaps only natural that he should feel a distinct sense of exasperation with men who are indifferent, apathetic, and (to him) quite stupid. He has written scarcely an essay which does not at least imply the inferiority of the average American.

Nowhere else in the world, he thinks, is superiority more easily attained or more eagerly admitted. Indeed, the chief business of the nation, as a nation, is the setting up of heroes, 'mainly bogus'. As examples, there are Woodrow Wilson, William Jennings Bryan, J. Pierpont Morgan - the nation even takes Congress seriously! It requires no intrinsic merit to elevate a man in America; in fact, the curse of the country is that it is so afraid of ideas that it treats its best men as enemies. "The ideal American, in a public sense, is a respectable vacuum."

"All of which may be boiled down to this: that the United States is essentially a commonwealth of third-rate men - that distinction is easy here because the general level of culture, of information, of taste and judgment, of ordinary competence is so low . . . Third-rate men, of course, exist in all countries, but it is only here that they are in full control of the state, and with it of all the national standards."⁴⁹

Another popular theory against which he rebels is that we are a nation of young men with a youthful outlook.

49. Mencken, op. cit., p. 29.

He finds instead all the characteristics of senescence: a great distrust of ideas, habitual fearfulness, fidelity to a few established beliefs, a touch of mysticism. And the reason?

"If you would penetrate to the causes thereof, simply go down to Ellis Island and look at the next shipload of immigrants. You will not find the spring of youth in their step; you will find the shuffling of exhausted men.⁵⁰ From such . . . the American stock has sprung."

A "melancholy colonialism" is another of the curses of America. Indeed, he wonders, would there be any intellectual life at all if it were not for the steady importation in bulk of ideas from abroad, particularly from England? The average Anglo-Saxon American is simply a second-rate Englishman.

"It is my . . . conviction that the American People, taking one with another, constitute the most timorous, sniveling, poltroonish, ignominious mob of serfs and goose-steppers ever gathered under one flag in Christendom since the end of the Middle Ages, and that they grow more timorous, more shiveling, more poltroonish, more ignominious every day."⁵¹

Here he is filled with rage at the mob spirit which he sees in the United States. A lover of liberty and of independent thought and action, it infuriates him when he considers

50. Mencken, op. cit. p. 24.

51. Ibid., p. 10.

that American thinking, when it concerns itself with fundamentals, is timid and superficial - that it evades the serious issues of life, setting up taboos on such subjects as religion, sex, and government. "Whatever is profound and penetrating we stand off from; whatever is facile and shallow we embrace." His revolt is the revolt of a dynamic personality against static conditions. He sees that the mob does not have his own energy and individuality, and hastens to declare that the American is eager to be told what to think, and will accept any instruction; this accounts for the fact that we have a nation/^{of}'crazes' - even a 'combat of crazes'.⁵² Quacks and evangelists such as Anthony Comstock, Dwight L. Moody, and William Jennings Bryan, constantly try to obscure intelligent thought and translate it into emotionalism which will carry the mob. There is the ignorant populace, easily swayed; there is the ignorant plutocracy, hostile to new ideas; finally, there is a 'herd of intellectual eunuchs', quite as stupid as the plutocracy. With no intellectual aristocracy, how can there be sound logic instead of emotion, asks Mr. Mencken?

Strangely enough, even while surrounded by all these

52. Mencken, op. cit., p. 79f, I.

barriers, the average American thinks that his salient passion is his hot and unquenchable rage for liberty! Actually, he has less personal liberty than any other man of Christendom; laws limiting the radius of his free activity multiply year by year; the explanation is that he is now so accustomed to the denial of his constitutional rights that he no longer protests.⁵³ He still further curtails what little liberty is left him by being a 'joiner'. This gives him a feeling of security - he feels the pack behind him. And so the whole thinking of the country thus runs down the channel of mob emotion; there is no actual conflict of ideas, but only a succession of crazes, with the mob's eternal suspicion of ideas always in power. Regimentation - in dress, in social customs, in political beliefs, and even in religious doctrines - is the watchword.

Neither is education doing anything to better the situation;

"The doctrine . . . that the American colleges and universities, with precious few exceptions, are run by stock jobbers and manned by intellectual prostitutes . . . will certainly give no fillip of

53. H. L. Mencken, The American Credo, (with G. J. Nathan), New York, 1921, p. 14f.

surprise to steady readers of my critical compositions."⁵⁴

Pedagogy in the United States is "fast descending to the estate of a childish necromancy, and the worst idiots, even among pedagogues, are the teachers of English." The college president does not escape his notice - we find this paragraph of boisterous and satiric ridicule of

"the American university president - the university president of the new six-sylinder, air-cooled, four wheel-brake model - half the quack, half the visionary, and wholly the go-getter - the brick, business-like, confidential, button-holing, regular fellow who harangues Rotary and Kiwanis, extracts millions from usurers by alarming them about Bolshevism, and so builds his colossal pedagogical slaughter house, with its tens of thousands of students, its professors of cheese-making, investment securities and cheerleading, its galaxy of football stars, and its general air of Barnum's circus . . . he is also thoroughly and magnificently characteristic of the land we live in. No other country has ever produced anything quite like him. No other country, I suspect, would tolerate him. But here he lives and flourishes, a superb and perfect American."⁵⁵

But it is probably not entirely the fault of the institutions of so-called learning - mere education cannot convert a peasant into an intellectual aristocrat. There are two great follies corrupting pedagogy beyond the elementals; one is in overestimating the receptivity of the pupil - the other in overestimating the possible efficiency of the teacher.

54. Mencken, Prejudices, V, p. 133f.

55. Ibid., 227f.

"Both rest upon that tendency to put too high a value upon mere schooling which characterizes democractic and upstart societies - a tendency born of the theory that a young man who has been 'educated', who has 'gone through college', is in some subtle way more capable of making money than one who hasn't."⁵⁶

One must remember that Mr. Mencken himself did not go to college, and that he always said that he was glad of it, as he had never learned anything worthwhile in school.

One of the most iconoclastic, unconventional, and irreverent outbreaks in all of Mr. Mencken's essays is the one in which he denounces the American farmer. An excerpt from it, although long, is too characteristic to be omitted:

"Let the farmer, so far as I am concerned, be damned forevermore! To hell with him, and bad luck to him! He is, unless I err, no hero at all, and no priest, and no altruist, but simply a tedious fraud and ignoramus, a cheap rogue and hypocrite, the eternal Jack of the human pack. He deserves all that he suffers under our system, and no more. Any city man, not insane, who sheds tears for him is shedding tears of the crocodile.

"No more grasping, selfish and dishonest mammal, indeed, is known to students of the Anthropeidea. When the going is good for him he robs the rest of us up to the extreme limit of our endurance; when the going is bad he comes bawling for help out of the public till. Has anyone ever heard of a farmer making any sacrifice of his own interests, however, slight, to the common good? Has anyone ever heard of a farmer practicing or advocating

56. Mencken, op. cit., III, p. 249.

any political idea that was not absolutely self-seeking - that was not, in fact, deliberately designed to loot the rest of us to his gain? Greenbackism, free silver, government guarantee of prices, all the complex fiscal imbecilities of the cow State John Baptists - these are the contributions of the virtuous husbandmen to American political theory. There has never been a time, in good seasons or bad, when his hands were not itching for more; there has never been a time when he was not ready to support any charlatan, however, grotesque, who promised to get it for him. Why, indeed, are politicians so polite to him - before election, so romantically amorous? For the plain and simple reason that only one issue ever interests or fetches him, and that is the issue of his own profit. He must be promised something definite and valuable, to be paid to him alone, or he is off after some other mountebank. He simply cannot imagine himself as a citizen of a commonwealth, in duty bound to give as well as to take; he can imagine himself only as getting all and giving nothing."⁵⁷

He continually blames the farmer for such things as Prohibition, comstockery, and the Mann Act - these things interfere with Mr. Mencken's philosophy of liberty. The agrarian, angry because he believed the city men to be enjoying themselves more than he himself could, brought about such laws in order to curtail their pleasures and force them to the same state of affairs which he had to endure. Mencken wastes no sympathy upon the farmers as a class, or even individually, for that matter. They fall into the same category as the 'snouting and preposterous Puritan',

57. Mencken, Prejudices, IV, p. 46f.

whom he also calls 'the malignant moralist, the Christian turned cannibal'.⁵⁸

"What then is the spirit of Americanism? I precipitate it conveniently into the doctrine that the way to ascertain the truth about anything . . . is to take a vote upon it, and that the way to propagate that truth, once it has been ascertained and proclaimed by lawful authority, is with a club. This doctrine, it seems to me, explains almost everything that is indubitable American, and particularly everything American that is most puzzling to men of older and less inspired cultures, from the lush and unprecedented American code of morals to the amazing and almost fabulous American code of honor. At one end it explains the archetypical buffooneries of the Ku Klux Klan, the American Legion, the Anti-Saloon League, the Department of Justice and all other such great engines of cultural propaganda, and at the other end it explains the amusing theory that the limits of the nation's aesthetic adventures are to be fixed by a vague and self-appointed comorra of rustic Ph. D.'s, and that any artist, indigenous or imported, who dares to pass them is not only a sinner against the beautiful but also a traitor to the flag, and that he ought, shall and must be throttled by the secular arm."⁵⁹

Such is H. L. Mencken's judgment of the American people and his country in general. Why, he asks himself, if you find so much that is unworthy of reverence in the United States, do you live here? And his answer explains what he writes: "Why do men go to Zoos?"

58. See chapter on 'American Letters'.

59. Mencken, op. cit., IV, p. 10f.

Government

We have seen that Mr. Mencken is unalterably opposed to government which curtails more than is absolutely necessary the liberties of the people governed. The United States, as a nation, has a government under which, according to the popular notion, everybody is 'free and equal'; on first thought it seems reasonable, therefore, to expect that Mr. Mencken is enthusiastic about democracy.

The truth of the matter is, however, that both democracy and government in general come in for a very large share of his satire. Democracy began as idealism - as a theory that the man at the bottom of the scale had a certain 'mystic merit'. It was a poetical fancy, and when put into practice proved to be most impracticable, for, he says, the common man is simply one of the mob - he is adolescent, fearful, superstitious, easily swayed by anyone, and has no concept of liberty. As soon as this inferior man found himself entrusted with unlimited power he became afraid of it, and was only too willing to shift the burden to anyone who would take it; the ones who took it were ambitious, selfish, grasping men who have made our democracy the farce it is today. But there seems to be little likelihood that it will be abandoned, for

"In these our days the Englishman is an incurable democrat, and being so he must needs take in with his mother's milk the vast repertoire of delusions which go with democracy, and particularly the master delusion that all human problems, in the last analysis, are soluble, and that all that is required for their solution is to take counsel freely, to listen to wizards, to count votes, to agree upon legislation. This is the prime and immovable doctrine of the mobile vulgus set free; it is the liveliest of all the fruits of its defective powers of observation and reasoning, and above all, of its defective knowledge of demonstrated facts, especially in history. Take away this notion that there is some mysterious infallibility in the sense of the majority, this theory that the consensus of opinion is inspired, and the democratic idea begins to wither; in fact, it ceases to have any intelligibility at all. But the notion is not taken away; it is nourished; it flourishes on its own effluvia. And out of it spring the two rules which give direction to all democratic thinking, the first being that no concept in politics or conduct is valid (or more accurately respectable), which rises above the comprehension of the great masses of men, or which violates any of their inherent prejudices or superstitions, and the second being that the articulate individual in the mob takes on some of the authority and inspiration of the mob itself, and that he is thus free to set himself up as a soothsayer, so long as he does not venture beyond the aforesaid bounds - in brief, that one man's opinion, provided it observe the current decorum, is as good as any other man's."⁶⁰

Democracy, Mr. Mencken feels, has run its course. The enfranchisement of the lower classes, taking the form of majority rule, has now degenerated into mob rule. Mob rule! that is the thing against which Mr. Mencken rages and storms.

60. Mencken, A Book of Prefaces, New York, 1917, p. 20.

The government of the nation by the inferior four-fifths of mankind can be nothing short of farce - a farce in which the actors are people with minds not developed beyond adolescence - who are Baptists, Methodists, Rotarians, osteopaths, censors, and Puritans. In place of the stupid chaos which must inevitably result from government by such 'congenital idiots', he advocates rule by the aristocracy. Just what is to be the distinguishing feature of this aristocracy is not quite clear - probably he has never formulated a definite concept of the qualifications even in his own mind. It may be that they are to be an aristocracy of blood, or of 'free spirits', or of those who appreciate Bach and Beethoven.⁶¹ Just how he can reconcile his idea of aristocratic government with his passion for liberty is difficult to see - perhaps the liberty is to be granted only to the aristocracy. But before such reconstruction his concern is with destruction - to blow up the balloon of Democracy to such a size that it bursts - to make it ridiculous through exaggeration.

As conditions now are, however, it is plain that liberty has become disreputable and is no longer respected. The average democrat may say that the establishment and safeguarding of liberty is the chief purpose of democracy, but actually

61. Walter Lippmann, Men of Destiny, New York, 1927, p. 64.

he really cares nothing whatever for liberty, and is always willing to sell it for money. Little by little Congress and the State Legislatures have invaded and nullified the privileges guaranteed the free American by the Bill of Rights, and today they are so flimsy that, says Mr. Mencken, no lawyer not insane would attempt to defend his client by bringing them up!

But the worst curse of democracy, as this critic sees it, is that it makes public office a monopoly of a palpably inferior and ignoble group of men. The better sort of men, unable to reconcile their consciences with the corrupt state of law and politics, do not run for office, or if by some miracle they are already in office, they resign, and their places are filled by 'limber non-entities'. These latter get their positions not through statesmanship, but through flattering and 'kowtowing' to the mob. The ballot box is defined by H. L. Mencken as

"the altar of democracy. The cult served upon it is the worship of jackals by jackasses."⁶²

And democracy is

"that system of government under which the people, having 35,717,342 native-born adult whites to choose from, including thousands who are handsome and many who are wise, pick out a Coolidge to be head of the state."⁶³

62. H. L. Mencken, "Jazz Webster" in his Book of Burlesques, New York, 1916, p. 201.

63. Mencken, Prejudices, V, p. 302 f.

It follows that America is under control of a bureaucracy - it is a government of men, not of laws. And the only way that the obscure and friendless man can exist unmolested is to remain so obscure and friendless that the bureaucracy is unaware of him. The moment that he emerges from complete anonymity

"Its agents have at him with all the complex and insane laws and regulations that now crowd the statute-books, and unless he can find some more powerful person to aid him, either for cash in hand or in return for his vote, he may as well surrender himself at once to ruin and infamy."⁶⁴

The government is not impersonal - all its acts are acts to the self-interest of a group of men determined to serve their own advantages whatever the means. These 'scoundrels' cooperate; they are wiser than the common man who is being hood-winked. They recognize the plain fact that they form a class separate from the general run of men, with interests opposed to the latter, and so they stand together whenever their common advantages are menaced.

It immediately becomes apparent to Mr. Mencken that one of the grave defects in the American system of government lies in the fact that it fails to provide any swift and suitable punishment for the special crimes of public offi-

64. Mencken, op. cit., VI, p. 240.

cials. Even for crimes in violation of ordinary statutes of the realm - embezzlement, conversion, blackmail, armed entry, kidnapping, or common assault - it seems to be extremely difficult to bring offenders to justice; they enjoy a sort of unwritten immunity, similar to the constitutional immunity of United States Senators while the Senate is in session. During the administration of the 'Martyr Wilson',

"the thugs and perjurers of the so-called Department of Justice . . . committed nearly all the crimes of fraud and violence on the books, and yet, so far as I know, not one of them was ever punished, or, indeed, so much as prosecuted."⁶⁵

But the case is even worse when it comes to crimes that are peculiar to public officials - those which arise out of the nature of their legal status, such as dissipating the public funds, loading the public rolls with 'useless and pediculous job-holders', converting public property to private uses, condoning crimes against the government, and administering the laws in a partial and dishonest manner.⁶⁶ In such cases the ordinary public statutes are ineffective, and there are almost no special laws. Impeachment is such a complicated matter that it is seldom resorted to; when it is, it nearly always fails to convict, the reason being that

65. Mencken, Prejudices, IV, p. 130 f.

66. Ibid., p. 131 f.

it is essentially a political, not a judicial process. Even if successful, it merely removes the offender from office and leaves him free to aspire to other positions, which is, Mr. Mencken points out, as absurd as it would be to limit a burglar's punishment to kicking him out of the house.

But then, justice in ordinary cases is very little better:

"the administration of justice in the Republic is stupid, dishonest, and against all reason and equity - and from this judgment I except no more than thirty judges, including two upon the bench of the Supreme Court of the United States."⁶⁷

It is not the fault of juries that so many murderers escape justice; they find the gunmen guilty (one might easily question the accuracy of Mr. Mencken's observation here), and it is the judges higher up who deliver them from the noose and turn them out to resume their butcheries. In the Jazz Webster, that compilation of satirical definitions, we find the following:

JUDGE: An officer appointed to mislead, restrain, hypnotize, cajole, seduce, browbeat, flabbergast, and bamboozle a jury in such a manner that it will forget all the facts and give its decision to the best lawyer. The objection to judges is that they are seldom capable of a sound professional judgment

67. Mencken, Prejudices, III, p. 10.

of lawyers. The objection to lawyers is that the best are the worst.

LAWYER: One who protects us against robbers by taking away the temptation.

COURTROOM: A place where Jesus Christ and Judas Iscariot would be equals, with the betting odds in favor of Judas.

FINE: Abribe paid by a rich man to escape the lawful penalty of his crime. In China such bribes are paid to the judge personally; in America they are paid to him as agent for the public.

After this wholesale denunciation of the judiciary, what has he to say of the two other branches of government?

"It is . . . one of my firmest and most sacred beliefs . . . that the government of the United States in both its legislative arm and its executive arm, is ignorant, incompetent, corrupt, and disgusting - and from this judgment I except no more than twenty executioners of their laws."⁶⁸

One of the forces in America against which Mr. Mencken constantly hurls his invectives is Puritanism. To him, it is identical with democracy - the two are simply different facets of the same stone. Puritanism is not peculiar to democratic man, but it is only under democracy that it is liberated and becomes the philosophy of the state. The Puritan's actual motives are (a) to punish the other fellow for having a better time in the world, and (b) to bring the other fellow down to his own unhappy level.⁶⁹ Democracy, then, provides the machinery which Puritanism needs for the execution of its aims; the alarm is sounded, the mob is terrified and its sense

68. Mencken, Prejudices, III, p. 9.

69. Mencken, Notes on Democracy, New York, 1926, p. 155.

of moral righteousness aroused, and eureka! the laws are passed. As a result we have Prohibition, the Mann Act, the Comstock laws, the anti-evolution laws of Tennessee and Mississippi. And inherent in their very nature is an irreconcilable antagonism between democratic Puritanism and common decency (which Mr. Mencken defines as the habit in the individual of viewing with toleration the acts and ideas of other individuals).⁷⁰ This conflict, he says, has reached the stage of open and continuous war, with Puritanism sweeping the field and common decency in flight. Thus life in this country grows increasingly uncomfortable to men of the more urbane and seemly sort, and, despite the great material prosperity of the Republic, the general stock of happiness probably diminishes steadily, the whole tendency of law seeming to be to put down happiness wherever it is encountered.

Prohibition has been mentioned as an outgrowth of Puritanism. It is quite obvious that Mr. Mencken objects to it violently and openly.

"It . . . seems to me that so long as Puritanism remains the dominant philosophy in America - and certainly it shows no sign of relaxing its hold upon the low-caste Anglo-Saxon majority - it will be quite hopeless to look for an abandon-

70. Mencken, op. cit., p. 172.

ment of Prohibition, or even for any relaxation of its extravagant and probably unconstitutional excesses. But for precisely the same reason it seems to me to be very unlikely that Prohibition will ever be enforced, or, indeed, that any honest effort will ever be made to enforce it."⁷¹

Prohibition has been and still is a failure, he thinks. Nor can we rely upon a pusillanimous Congress either to antagonize the wets by enforcing the amendment or risk provoking the wrath of the Anti-Saloon League by repealing it. While the whole uplift movement of the Puritans has been to blame, it is mostly due to Prohibition that the courts have lost the respect of the people and the Federal government has become 'a spy and a snitcher'.

A minor 'prejudice' of Mr. Mencken's is the foreign policy of the United States. Its habitual manner of dealing with other nations, whether friend or foe, is "hypocritical, disingenuous, knavish, and dishonorable"; as examples he cites the annexation of so much territory following the Mexican War, the unfairness practiced in its treatment of Spain when bringing her to terms, and the entire World War, from beginning to end - he makes no exceptions anywhere. The country has an unenviable reputation for not making any fine distinction between 'meum' and 'tuum' in its relations; its wars have usually been mere cloaks to

71. Mencken, Prejudices, IV, p. 28f.

rob non-combatants.

"It is perfectly possible to conduct war in a gallant and honorable manner . . . More, the thing has been done, and many times in the history of the world. If it has been seldom done by democratic nations, then blame democracy, not war. In democratic nations everything noble and of good account tends to decay and smell badly."⁷²

Well, what would he suggest to take the place of Democracy? Should our present system of government be overthrown, and some form of absolute monarchy or oligarchy substituted?

"Not at all. All things considered, I am convinced . . . that the republican form of government in vogue in the United States . . . is the best, safest, and most efficient government ever set up in the world. But . . . its practice is beneficent because its theory is happily impossible . . . It is lucky for civilization that democracy must ever remain a phantasm, to entertain and hearten the lowly like the hope of heaven, but to fall short eternally of realization. If it were actually possible to give every citizen an equal voice in the management of the world . . . the democratic ideal would reduce itself to an absurdity in six months . . . The mind of the government, as a government, would be the mind of the average citizen of the nether majority - a mind necessarily incapable of grasping the complex concepts formulated by the progressive minority."⁷³

What democracy most needs, he says, is a party which will separate the good that is in it theoretically from the evils that beset it practically, and then try to erect that good into a workable system. It will never have such a party

72. Mencken, Prejudices, V, p. 28f.

73. Mencken, Men vs. the Man, (with R.R. LaMonte), New York, 1910, p. 152.

until it has a genuine aristocracy; in the meantime,
H. L. Mencken surveys it and is infinitely entertained.
ed.

American Letters

In addition to being a political and social critic, a good part of H. L. Mencken's work is as a critic of letters. It was mainly in that capacity, through his articles in Smart Set, that he first got the attention of the general public outside Baltimore. His pronouncements, as always, were startling, were often denounced as heretical, but were widely read.

In 1917 he published his Book of Prefaces, which, unlike his earlier Prejudices, is devoted entirely to literature. It contains appreciative essays on Joseph Conrad, Theodore Dreiser, and James Huneker, and an essay on 'Puritanism as a Literary Force' which presents in condensed form most of his objections to contemporary American literature. It is greatly to his credit that most of the writers whom he has defended against the attacks of Puritanism are now recognized as holding high places in American literature - Theodore Dreiser, James Huneker, George Ade, James Branch Cabell, Joseph Hergesheimer, Willa Cather, Eugene O'Neill, Sherwood Anderson. And he it was who pressed the cases of such foreigners as James Joyce, Havelock Ellis, Lord Dunsany, Ibsen, Hauptmann, Strindberg, Sudermann, Nietzsche,

and Shaw.⁷⁴

In making his denunciation of Puritanism in literature he continually asserts that the American judges everything, including beauty, in terms of right and wrong, and this moral obsession has given a strong color to American literature. In other countries there have been periods of outburst, of sheer joy of living - the Shakesperian Age, for instance - but in this country the literature has been under harsh Puritan restraints from the beginning.

"A novel or a play is judged among us, not by its dignity of conception, its artistic honesty, its perfection of workmanship, but almost entirely by its orthodoxy of doctrine, its platitudeousness, its usefulness as a moral tract . . . Not only the childish incompetents who write for the daily press, but also most of our critics of experience and reputation, seem quite unable to estimate a piece of writing as a piece of writing, a work of art as a work of art; they almost inevitably drag in irrelevant gabble as to whether this or that personage in it is respectable, or this or that situation in accordance with the national notions of what is edifying and nice."⁷⁵

Such ideas have two sources; first, they are in some degree inherent in the American people since the time that the country was settled by the Puritans from England. But if that were all, the tendency might have been overcome;

74. Ernest Boyd, H. L. Mencken, New York, 1925, p. 74.

75. Mencken, A Book of Prefaces, p. 200 f.

the second is the rise, since the Civil War, of militant Puritanism, under the leadership of Anthony Comstock. Not content to save his own soul, Comstock became intent on 'ramming salvation down the throat of the nation'. Beginning with the passage of the Comstock Postal Act in 1873, the movement has become more and more closely organized in its righteous fervor to limit the reading of the public to what certain 'competent' censors considered 'decent' and 'moral'. It is natural that such an effort to curtail liberty would infuriate Mr. Mencken - he has attacked it both with bludgeon and with rapier. He has maintained that those who are setting themselves to judge what is 'decent' are fanatics; that they show their incompetency by barring Havelock Ellis, G. B. Shaw, George Moore, Dreiser, and letting Elinor Glyn, Harry K. Thaw, and dozens of trashy magazines and pamphlets go uncensored. Editors must stop to consider whether what they publish will be acceptable to these critics, and consequently must reject hundreds of excellent manuscripts.

But he sees signs of revolt against such absurd laws; he is a believer in "the reality of progress", even though it is almost unbearably slow, and so he hopes for better standards for judging literature to come in the future:

"Time is a great legalizer, even in the field of morals. We have yet no delivery, but we have

at least the beginnings of a revolt, or, at all events, of a protest."⁷⁶

It is interesting to discover what Mr. Mencken, as a critic, thinks about criticism. First of all, he makes it clear that the motive of the critic should be that of the artist:

"It is . . . the simple desire to function freely and beautifully to give outward and objective form to ideas that bubble inwardly and have a fascinating lure in them."⁷⁷

But is this true of American critics? Most emphatically no! Instead, they confuse the function of criticism with the function of reform; they tell what is comforting instead of what is true, and all is constructive criticism. They fail to recognize and understand all that is most forceful, original, and significant in the emerging literature of the country, accepting only what is orthodox and platitudinous. Briefly, they lack intellectual resiliency - they are 'grown-up sophomores'.

And what of poetry? He defines it as a comforting piece of fiction set to more or less lascivious music - 'a slap on the back in waltz time'.⁷⁸ It is the effort of the imagination to escape from reality in two ways: denial of objective

76. Mencken, A Book of Prefaces, p. 232.

77. Mencken, Prejudices, III, p. 84.

78. Mencken, Prejudices, III, p. 151.

facts and denial of subjective facts. As specimen of the first sort he offers

"God's in His heaven,
All's well with the world."

And of the second

"I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul."

The essential character of poetry, laying aside its possible merit as mere sound, is its flouting of what every reflective adult knows to be the truth. No intelligent poet should for a minute take what he writes as serious.

This attitude is explained when we correlate it with Mr. Mencken's usual avoidance of emotion. His own poetry, written when he was quite young, shows few traces of emotion; much of it bears traces of Kipling's influence.⁷⁹

It would be out of character for a satiric critic who fosters the impression that he is a buffoon to display much feeling, even though there is a distinctly serious undertone in most of his essays, try as he may to keep it out. So he holds a firm rein on his feelings and is consequently suspicious of poetry, whose aim is to arouse those feelings; one familiar with his biography is inclined to suspect

79. H. L. Mencken, Ventures into Verse, Baltimore, 1903.

that only in his life-long devotion to music has he let his emotions escape him.

But he admits that he can and does enjoy certain kinds of poetry; what he cannot abide is the 'new poetry', the term with which he designates the wave of 'free verse' which swept the country around 1912 and after. Vers libre he defines as 'a device for making poetry easier to write and harder to read'.⁸⁰ The trouble with most of the new poets was that they tried to rationalize poetry, in direct opposition to its essential nature, which, according to Mr. Mencken's definition, is to conceal and obliterate harsh realities. It can never be reconciled with intellectual processes, and some of its earlier exponents, notably Sandburg and Lindsay, discovered that fact and turned back. Others, like Amy Lowell, went to the extremes of its possibilities. The new poetry is interesting, in its bizarre unearthly way, but it is 'no more poetry than the college yell is music or the act of Congress wisdom'.

The primary aim of the novel, on the other hand, is the faithful representation of human beings; it sets forth not what might be true, but what is true. To the extent to which it departs from that fidelity to fact, it is a poor novel; if

80. Mencken, "Jazz Webster", p. 209.

it departs violently it ceases to be a novel at all.

On the purely technical side, the American novel has made immense progress. It is quite often adeptly constructed and well written. The novelists of today, especially the younger ones, have given earnest study to form - perhaps too much, for they are weak in observation of character. The average American novel does not evoke memorable images of human beings; too often it becomes a mere treatise in the hands of most of the lesser writers. Often championing such novelists as Dreiser, Cabell, and Edith Wharton, Mr. Mencken also rates Willa Cather among the best:

"My Antonia is a great deal more than simply a good novel. It is a document in the history of American literature. It proves, once and for all time, that accurate representation is not, as the campus critics of Dreiser seem to think, inimical to beauty. It proves, on the contrary, that the most careful and penetrating representation is itself the source of a rare and wonderful beauty. No romantic novel ever written in America, by man or woman, is one-half so beautiful as My Antonia."⁸¹

As a whole, however, he does not believe that the quality of American prose is very high - it is chiefly remarkable for mediocrity. The current demand for a restoration of what is called the American tradition in letters is nothing more or less, at bottom, than a demand for a supine and nonsensical conformity - a demand that every American, regardless of his

81. Mencken, Prejudices, III, p. 210.

racial character and natural way of thinking, force all his thoughts into the low-caste Anglo-Saxon mold. The tradition of American letters has been banality, moral purpose - the 'glad' books are some of the best illustrations. They are native and peculiar to a civilization which erects the 'amug vanities and certainties of the ignorant and quack-ridden into a national way of life'.

All this body of work has been, he thinks, a 'false start' in the American tradition, which is at the present moment beginning to be remedied. Today, it seems to Mr. Mencken, the imaginative writer, whether novelist, poet or dramatist, is quite as free as he deserves to be - free to depict the life about him precisely as he sees it, and to interpret it in any manner he pleases. The publishers of the country are no longer fearful of novelty; it is even possible that difficulties may come through the fact that they are so hospitable to it that they fail to distinguish between the novelty that has thought behind it and that which is only working for a bizarre effect.

The younger American writers of recent years show a certain elasticity, a sense of aliveness, and a delight in the spectacle before them. It is a breaking away from tradition and imitation, and they are being criticized

for it, but what they are really doing is making a first-hand examination of the national scene and then representing it in terms that are wholly American. It is perhaps the first dawn of a genuine sense of nationality. They are the pioneers of a literature that, whatever its other defects, will at least be a faithful reflection of the national life.

"We have already reached, in Howells, our Hannah More; in Clemens, our Swift; in Henry James, our Horace Walpole; in Woodberry, Robinson et al., our Cowpers, Southey and Crabbes-perhaps we might even make a composite and call it our Johnson. We are sweating through our Eighteenth Century, our era of sentiment, our spiritual measles. Maybe a new day is not quite so far off as it seems to be, and with it we may get our Hardy, our Conrad, our Swinburne, our Thoma, our Moore, our Meredith, and our Synge."⁸²

82. Mencken, Book of Prefaces, p. 232f.

PART III
CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

Ambrose Bierce disappeared into Mexico in 1913; with the outbreak of the World War H. L. Mencken began to be widely noticed by the American public. Thus there was no break in the barrage of criticism which was steadily directed at American life by these two men, independently of each other, to be sure, but remarkably similar in ideas. It has been established that they knew each other but slightly;⁸³ there is no record of what Bierce thought of Mr. Mencken, but the latter tells us that he met Bierce at the funeral of a mutual friend, Percival Pollard, and found him the most thorough-going cynic he had ever met and "the most gruesome of men."⁸⁴

Both critics are aristocrats and have only contempt for government which is 'of the people, by the people, and for the people'. They belong to the anti-democratic tradition in American thought that goes back to Alexander Hamilton and John Adams;⁸⁵ they are suspicious of the 'masses' and anathematize government by the ignorant and emotional mob. We find further similarity of view in their attacks on the inefficiency of the legislative arm of the government

83. Grattan, op. cit., p. 50.

84. Mencken, Prejudices, I, p. 130.

85. Grattan, op. cit., p. 226.

and the perversion of justice continually occurring in the judicial system because of its rascally judges and lawyers and incompetent jurors. Their views are identical when they brand "liberty" as an illusion and expose the dishonesty of office-holders and the immunity of criminals. Aristocrats, they believe that it is not capitalism itself, but the ease with which the public may be duped that is responsible for occasional corruption of the capitalistic system, trusts in particular. No human being, they both say, could resist the temptation to take advantage of such a gullible and irrational mob as the American public.

When attacking popular figures of the day they are equally fearless and outspoken - Bierce againse Denis Kearney, Colis P. Huntington, and Bryan; Mencken against Bryan, Roosevelt, and Wilson. Not infrequently both forgot their satire and became merely heavily sarcastic, as when Bierce said, "Mr. Bryan's creation was the unstudied act of his own larnyx; it said 'Let there be Bryan and there was Bryan'",⁸⁶ and H. L. Mencken called the same man the "supreme impostor of democracy -- the reductio ad absurdum of its pretensions."⁸⁷

When we come to literary criticism we still find them in accord. Both regard the function of criticism to be a crea-

86. Carey McWilliams, Ambrose Bierce. A Biography, New York, 1929, p. 242.

87. Mencken, Prejudices, V, p. 27.

tive process which incidentally reveals the person criticising rather than the writer criticised. Bierce carries this theory to an extreme; many of his critical essays are simply defenses of his own opinions and withering denunciations of those who dare to disagree with him. Mr. Mencken is more open-minded, however, and is always 'discovering' new writers and championing them until the public finally accepts them. But then Bierce once said, "It has never occurred to me to look upon myself as a literary critic.",⁸⁸ while H. L. Mencken has earned much of his reputation in this field.

They agree in their condemnation of the 'new poetry', or vers libre, but on the question of slang they are not in accord. Although both of them wish to keep the American language a growing and elastic thing, Mr. Mencken contends in his American Language that a certain amount of vivid colloquialism and slang will help to achieve this effect; Bierce believes that it will have just the opposite effect - that it will make the language static because after the first time a slang term is used it becomes a mere repetition of someone else's wit, lacking in both humor and aptness. The conflicting viewpoints are quite evident in the writing of the two men; Bierce is a purist in his speech, while H. L. Mencken has no hesitancy in introducing new and startling colloquialisms and slang, such as 'wowers', 'Homo boobians', or

88. In a letter to Herman Scheffauer, quoted in Nesle, op. cit., p. 216.

'go-getter'. Comparisons of almost any passages quoted in the preceding chapters will reveal this difference in the language of the two men.

There are numerous miscellaneous points upon which they come together - religion is an example. Bierce came of an extremely religious family, and early rebelled against the tradition.⁸⁹ It is not Christ, but Christianity which he attacks - an attitude not original with him, however. He declares more than once that his criterion on determining matters of morals or conduct is the question, "What would ^{an} Christ have done?" - rather/astonishing query when made by one otherwise so irreverent. On the other hand, H. L. Mencken came of a family that for the two generations preceding had been indifferent to religion,⁹⁰ and his conclusion is that religion has been a curse to mankind, damaging clear and honest thinking.⁹¹

Again, we find that the two men are not exactly agreed when they consider woman. Bierce is honest in his conviction that woman's intelligence is less than that of men and that her only place is as a 'mother of men'; H. L. Mencken, while laughing and slyly poking fun at her in his In Defense of Women, reveals that he really thinks her cleverer than the ordinary run of men - although that is not giving her very

89. McWilliams, op. cit., p. 23.

90. Isaac Goldberg, The Man Mencken, New York, 1925, p. 131.

91. Mencken, in Forum, LXXXIV, loc. cit.

high praise. But both of them dislike the thought of woman suffrage.

So we see that they very often attacked the same things, but not with the same amount of success. Bierce did most of his writing during the years between 1890 and 1905, a period which believed itself to be beyond reproach, as Thomas Beer has shown in his Mauve Decade. His ideas were too advanced for his time (at present we see the truth of many of his arguments, though there are still many of which we do not approve, as the wholesale killing of criminals) and he paid the penalty of being either ignored or summarily condemned. But during and after the War came a wave of disillusion, and the American people were only too willing to be told what was wrong with them. Bierce's political ideas became public opinion; H. L. Mencken came to the forefront heading a similar rebellion and was hailed as a sound critic of public affairs. His attack was more properly timed and consequently much more effective.

It is interesting to speculate as to the reasons for the violent attacks which these two critics make upon America - is it because each has in mind a picture of what the country or life in general ought to be and is not, or are they simply railing at conditions without a better state in mind? It is a difficult question to answer; neither man ever tries to tell us seriously just what his reasons are.

Those who have occasion to dislike Bierce, or who have not studied him closely are inclined to declare that he was by nature bitter and cynical. Carey McWilliams, however, an impartial and well-informed biographer has another opinion - one with which I am inclined to agree. He says that Bierce was by instinct one of the most idealistic of men, but that every contact with vulgarity, sloth, and dishonesty brought "a reaction so spontaneous and violent that it unbalanced him for the moment";⁹² this would seem to explain his vituperation satisfactorily; perhaps toward the end of his life, when his satire became even more unkind than before, bitterness was such a habit with him that he became almost a confirmed cynic. But nothing can be proved - it must always be a matter of personal opinion and interpretation of his writings.

In the case of Mr. Mencken, we have a little more evidence. The details of his life are not shrouded in mystery, as is the case with much of Bierce's life. In his love of music, good literature, intelligent conversation, and his attachment to his home, we catch a glimpse of what he would like to see in America as a whole. Mr. Goldberg suggests that he is essentially an aesthetic critic; that he is in

92. McWilliams, op. cit., p. 115.

93. Goldberg, op. cit., p. 27.

search of beauty, and failure to find it turns him to scorn and satire or clownish laughter. At least we are safe in saying that he has a conception of a 'good life' of which cultural values and intelligence are an essential part - but he is not optimistic as to the probability of its attainment.

One very marked similarity between the two men lies in their aptness for epigrams. Mencken himself recognized Bierce's skill when he wrote:

"If Bierce is remembered, it will probably be for his epigrams, especially those in prose. They include some of the noblest specimens ever put into English. The wit in them is extraordinarily pungent, impudent, and devastating, and in form they are helped rather than damaged by the author's highly artificial and self-conscious style."⁹⁴

The greater number of these epigrams are contained in his Devil's Dictionary; and define, not the essence of the terms in question, but some implication of their applications to human nature. A few examples will show their quality better than discussion of them:

"Once: enough."

"To be positive is to be mistaken at the top of one's voice."

"The senate is a body of elderly gentlemen charged with high duties and misdemeanors."

"Is it because Christ is an unknown quantity that Christians write: Xmas?"

Mencken's epigrams, too, are witty. He, too, has compiled a dictionary which he has called the Jazz Webster.

94. H. L. Mencken, "The Ambrose Bierce Mystery," in American Mercury, Sept. 1929.

The form is not unusual with satirists, so it is not probable that he derived the idea from Bierce. A few of these may be given for comparison with Bierce's:

"Immortality: the condition of a dead man who doesn't believe that he is dead."

"Theology is an effort to explain the unknowable in terms of the not worth knowing."

"Love at first sight: a labor saving device."

"Fame: an embalmer trembling with stage-fright."

Further analysis of the manner of the two satirists reveals essential differences. The fact that they have dissimilar natures accounts for this difference in spirit. Mencken is humorous and sometimes witty; Bierce is witty and occasionally humorous. It is the difference between good-nature and bitterness - between hopefulness and pessimism. Mr. Mencken attacks indignantly and ridicules hilariously; Bierce criticises bitterly, cynically, and not infrequently he is cruel. There is no malice in Mr. Mencken, and so there is no hurt afterwards, but Bierce's reaction to distasteful affairs is so violent as to be stinging and antagonizing to his readers. In another mood, Bierce smiles sardonically while Mr. Mencken guffaws. Mencken uses exaggeration for effect; Bierce is carried away and is serious about it. Bad as the nation is, says Mencken, others are probably no better, and there is hope of improvement eventually - "I believe in the reality of progress." But to Bierce the state of affairs is past reform, and he never tires of telling, from some vantage point in the far future,

how the entire American civilization fell. It is perhaps not to be wondered at, this difference in spirit, even when it is not caused by differences in their natures. Mr. Mencken has nearly always had an appreciative audience to play to, while Bierce had only a very few who approved of him - practically everyone else was hostile, and usually showed it by 'a large chunk of silence.'

This last fact is, I think, significant. It has no doubt been evident in the chapters devoted to Bierce that some of his favorite arguments are not sound doctrine - those on the essential weakness of self-government and the results of women in industry, for instance. They give the impression of being 'snap' judgments or mere personal prejudice, without having been thought out clearly from beginning to end. The reason for these weak arguments very probably lies in the fact that his pronouncements were very seldom challenged; he was never forced to organize his opinions into a system and justify his reasoning. That he had a keen mind is evident in that he saw, before the time when they were generally acknowledged, the many wrongs in our system of government; it is only logical to suppose that if he had been forced to sustain his opinions in the face of criticism he would have justified or strengthened his arguments. Had he felt the necessity for self-justification that Mr. Mencken has always had forced upon him, he would very likely

have been a sounder critic of affairs; it is unfortunate that he left his theories so open to criticism.

But whatever the validity of their arguments, we have two satiric critics of American life, both bent upon destroying cant and hypocrisy. That one failed, at least during his lifetime, to make an impression, and that the other is having a large measure of success is due both to the conditions under which they wrote and to the essential differences in their methods of attack. Perhaps when they are regarded in the light of history, with the perspective given by distance, Ambrose Bierce and H. L. Mencken will be judged equally important and credited with more nearly the same keenness of insight into their times as revealed in their satiric criticism.

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